

Presbyterian Church in America

A MANUAL FOR NEW MEMBERS
With a Brief History by Kenneth S. Keyes

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THE STORY OF PRESBYTERIANISM

C. Gregg Singer, Ph.D.

Presbyterianism has a glorious history and a priceless heritage. Its origins are to be found in the Church of the New Testament and its rebirth is the climax of the Reformation. Its greatness does not lie in what men have done or accomplished in their own power but in what God has seen fit to do through those who have been so surrendered to His will and have been so dedicated to the great truths of the Scriptures as to be willing to give their very lives for the faith which was more than life to them. The history of our Church has literally been written at times in the blood of its martyrs.

Presbyterianism as a system of belief and form of church government appeared as a result of the Reformation. The Reformation, which began as a sincere attempt to reform the Roman Catholic Church of the later Middle Ages and to purify it from its corruptions, brought forth the Lutheran and Reformed (Presbyterian) systems on (the continent of) Europe, and the Church of England. These were the three great Protestant lines which branched away from the Roman Church in the 16th Century.

Martin Luther was the first of the great leaders of the movement, and he gave to the Church which bears his name its doctrine and form of church government. Luther blazed the trail for the reform of the Church, but his popularity and influence were greatest in Germany and Scandinavia. Although a great preacher and Bible teacher, it remained for John Calvin, systematic theologian, organizer and administrator, to captivate the other nations of Europe.

John Calvin, a prodigious writer, finished the work of reform which Luther began in 1517. Unlike Luther, the Geneva theologian had a tremendous influence in most of the countries of Europe from Poland and Hungary in the east to the British Isles in the west.

Calvin (3509-1564) was born in France and received the best education which could be obtained in the Europe of that day. Like Luther, he went through a time of great spiritual distress, although we do not know as much about this period of his life as we do about Luther. We know that some time about 1532 he was suddenly converted to a living faith in Jesus Christ which completely changed his life.

With his brilliant and logical mind, with his great sense of dedication to the will of God, he set himself to the systematic study of the Scriptures and set forth their teachings in a system which has come to be known as the Reformed Theology. He left France to spend most of his life after 1536 in Geneva, Switzerland, making that small city the great center of the Reformation for all of Europe. A word should be said about the use of that term "Reformed." It has a technical sense in which the Calvinistic system is distinguished from other evangelical systems. When we speak of ourselves as "Reformed" (a word more widely understood on the Continent than in America) we mean that we are Calvinists rather than Lutherans, Anglicans, Methodists, or what have you. There are Reformed churches (Netherlands, Germany), Huguenot churches (France), and Presbyterian churches (Scotland), but the common denominator is "Reformed."

Slowly, but surely, the Reformed theology spread to France, Poland, Hungary, Bohemia, the Netherlands, Germany, England, Scotland, Ireland, and finally to the new world of America. In Scotland the Calvinistic group became known as the Presbyterian Church. In England they were the Puritans. Elsewhere they were known as the Reformed Church.

CALVINISM IN ENGLAND

At first the Calvinists in England under Queen Elizabeth were a part of the Church of England. It had been her plan to establish a national church with an episcopal type of government which she could control, and a statement of doctrine which would please most Englishmen.

This plan to make it possible for high Anglicans and the Puritans to be in one organization for the purpose of having a united England did not really satisfy any of the groups in the nation. Neither on the one hand, those who really wanted to return to the Roman Church, nor on the other hand, the Puritans, who wanted a much simpler and more biblical form of government, liked the Established Church, as it was called.

Under James I (1603-1625) the Puritans gained tremendous influence in Parliament and became quite outspoken in their opposition to the absolute monarchy of James and to his religious policy for the people. Under Charles I the Puritan opposition finally became so strong that the nation arose in revolt under Oliver Cromwell, and in the civil war which followed Charles was driven from the throne. The Puritan party, often closely identified with Presbyterianism proper because of Scotland's political ties with Parliament at this time, for a while (13 years, to be exact) gained control of the government.

THE WESTMINSTER ASSEMBLY

In 1643 Parliament called the Westminster Assembly (so named because of the place where it met) to write a confession of faith and a plan of church government for England which would join England and Scotland in the Reformed faith. As a result of the Solemn League and Covenant of this same year, Scotland was an integral part of the endeavor.

This Westminster Assembly was one of the most important, if not the most important council of the entire history of the Christian Church. It was certainly the most important assembly in the history of Presbyterianism, for it produced the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms which have, ever since, remained the doctrinal foundation of Presbyterianism wherever it is found.

Many believe this assembly to have been the climax of the Reformation. Its membership included many of the most learned and truly Christian leaders of the day among the English speaking peoples. As an assembly of Christian scholars it has never been equaled. It gave to the work of Calvin, especially, but the other reformers as well, a rich, marvelous expression, permanence, and influence which are truly amazing. It was frankly Presbyterian in name and in character. Presbyterianism thus became the completion of the reformation of the doctrine and government of the church according to the teachings of the Bible, for English speaking peoples.

PRESBYTERIANISM IN AMERICA

Just at this time when Presbyterianism was coming into prominence in England, the settlement of the English colonies in the New World began and Puritans and Presbyterians took a leading part in the colonization program. Everyone knows of the Puritan settlements in New England.

Although these Puritans were spiritual brothers of the Presbyterians back home, the connection was more informal as they came to the New World before the Westminster Assembly sat. John Cotton, leader of the New Englanders, was invited to attend the Assembly but did not go.

By 1707 the Presbyterians of the Middle Colonies were numerous enough to form the first presbytery in America. Within a few years and under the efforts of Francis Makemie and other Presbyterians, the movement spread from New York and Pennsylvania into Virginia and the Carolinas. As a result, in 1789, the first General Assembly was held.

The original growth of Presbyterianism in the Middle Colonies was largely due to the huge emigration of Scots and Scottish-Irish (Scots who had fled to Ireland in times of persecution). For instance, over 30,000 Presbyterians arrived from Ireland alone in the two years 1771-1773. And at the time of the Revolutionary war it was reliably estimated that two million of the three million persons in the colonies were Calvinists (Reformed) of some sort.

As Presbyterianism spread southward and then westward over the mountains, it remained true to its heritage. As early as 1729, by the Adopting Act, the church proclaimed its loyalty to the Westminster Confession and to the Catechisms declaring them to be its standard of doctrine and government.

THE SOUTHERN CHURCH

In 1861 the Presbyterians of the south formed their own church and separated from those in the north. It has often been asserted that slavery caused the split in Presbyterianism. The famous Gardiner Spring Resolution offered to the General Assembly of 1861 was the occasion for the division. Northern leaders managed to pass a resolution committing the Presbyterian church officially to the support of the federal government in regard to secession. However, this "straw" which finally broke the back of the church was only the culmination of a long history of tension.

The issues lay much deeper than politics. Presbyterianism in the north had long been invaded by heresies. Liberal theology had already virtually taken over New England-today the center of both Universalism and Christian Science. Many ministers in the north had departed from the standards of the church contained in the Westminster Confession of Faith. In 1837 this had already led to one split in the church between the "New School" and the "Old School" Parties. The Presbyterians of the south were overwhelmingly in favor of the "Old School" viewpoint and they also took a strong stand against political activity on the part of the church. They felt that such activity was contrary to the Gospel and to the historic position of Presbyterianism.

In 1861 the first General Assembly of the Southern Presbyterian Church met in Augusta, Georgia, in the First Presbyterian Church building (which is still standing), reaffirming their loyalty to historic Presbyterianism and to the Confederacy. After the

war, the Presbyterian Church, U.S. was in a strong position doctrinally to proclaim the Gospel, even though its members had suffered along with the south in the war and the Reconstruction era.

Throughout most of its history, the Presbyterian Church U.S. remained true to the Reformation, to the Westminster Standards and to the Word of God upon which it is founded. In more recent years there have been significant departures in both faith and order to tarnish the testimony of a once-faithful church. In 1974, mounting tensions led to the separation of over 250 congregations to form the nucleus of a new Presbyterian Church in America.

Today the Presbyterian Church in America is the largest conservative Presbyterian body in the U.S., with some 130,000 members as of 1984 and churches in most of the 50 states.

Associated with the PC A in another level of relationship through the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC) are the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America, the Christian Reformed Church, the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, and the Korean Presbyterian Church.

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WHAT PRESBYTERIANS BELIEVE

Rev. G. Aiken Taylor, Ph.D.

It is frequently pointed out that the word "Presbyterian" refers to the Eldership and that Presbyterianism, as such, is a form of church government. But Presbyterianism is not only a form of government in the Church. It is also a well-defined system of beliefs or of doctrine. In the exaltation and interpretation of the Bible the Reformation reached its zenith in the teachings and writings of John Calvin. Thus Presbyterianism, following his interpretation of the Bible, is known as Calvinism. More specifically, the Calvinism of Presbyterians is based on the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, documents which were written nearly a hundred years after Calvin died.

Presbyterians share with other evangelical churches many basic beliefs. Presbyterians also recognize that earnest Christians may follow other interpretations of the Bible in non-essential matters. But Presbyterians believe that in the Reformed system (another word for Calvinism) the teachings of the Bible are most fully and most accurately set forth. Every Presbyterian officer and minister takes a vow that he believes the Reformed faith to be that system of doctrine which the Bible teaches. Every Presbyterian officer and minister in the more conservative Presbyterian churches, moreover, also vows that he will take steps to remove himself from his position should he ever find that his beliefs have taken another direction.

Now the strength of Presbyterianism lies in its central loyalty to the Scriptures. These churches have always insisted that only in the Bible may we find what we must believe about God, His works and His ways. Only the Bible is a rule of faith and life free from error-"our infallible rule of faith and practice." We believe that Presbyterianism agrees with what the Scriptures teach and that it contains nothing contrary to what the Scriptures teach.